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VIET MINH SANDALS

One afternoon about a week after I came back from Ben Suc, Colonel Chau came to my house to talk. I told him about the operation, and I said I had something to show him. I went up to my bedroom and brought down the Ho Chi Minh sandals I had taken from the tunnel, the vulcanized rubber sandals with treaded soles cut from discarded truck tires, worn by the Viet Cong and before them the Viet Minh fighting the French.

His eyes lit up, and he took them from me. He held them in his hands and looked at them for a long time as if he were holding a baby. His face was soft, and when he spoke it was in a tone I had never heard before. It wasn't indignant, or lecturing, or demanding. It was personal. He said, "I wore these for four years."

There was a long pause. I didn't say anything. He said, "They were the best years of my life."

After a while he put the sandals down and said, "You know, something I often ask myself is: I say that I left the Viet Minh and joined Bao Dai and then Diem because the Communists were too

harsh, they didn't respect our traditions, their way of development would be too hard for us, we needed help from the West. But is that really the truth? Or did I change sides because I was tired of living in tunnels and the jungle, I wanted to wear leather shoes and a good uniform, and sleep in a bed, in a house? I often ask myself that."

I waited for him to go on, but he didn't say any more. I asked him, "What is your answer?"

He said, "I don't know."

END NOTES

1. When I first met Tran Ngoc Chau, he was a lieutenant colonel in ARVN and the province chief of Kien Hoa Province (capital city Ben Trai, the city that, during the Tet Offensive in 1968, "had to be destroyed in order to be saved." He had been in the Viet Minh from 1945 to 1949, rising to battalion commander and then regimental political officer. When the French named Bao as Emperor, creating a facade (it turned out) of Vietnamese independence, Chau left the Viet Minh to serve Bao Dai, as did a number of other non-Communist members of the Viet Minh. He told me that when he realized that Bao Dai's sovereignty was a fraud, within months, it seemed too late to go back. When Ngo Dinh Diem became premier and then president of a "Republic of South Vietnam" Chau took officer training in the Army of the Republic.

At the time of this conversation, he was head of the program for training Revolutionary Development Cadres, the heart of the GVN pacification program.